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19. ROOSTING BEHAVIOUR OF COMMON TAILORBIRD *ORTHOTOMUS SUTORIUS* (PENNANT)

(With one plate)

The common tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* (Pennant) is a common warbler found throughout the Indian subcontinent. It uses both natural and artificial fibres to stitch 1-3 leaves to construct a tiny, pocket-sized nest where it lays 2-4 eggs between April and September (Ali and Ripley 1983, HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, Compact edn, OUP). The nest is generally built close to the ground amidst thick bushes to elude avian predators. Due to the availability of big-leafed garden plants and abundant food comprising of insects and nectar, this highly adaptable bird has colonized almost every medium-sized city garden. Like most diurnal birds, its daytime activities have been studied to some extent. However, there is a dearth of information on its roosting behaviour. In general, the roosting behaviour of gregarious

birds is well documented, but that of tiny solitary birds is little understood.

I would like to share my observations on the roosting behaviour of a pair of common tailorbirds in my backyard at Andheri, Mumbai. Though these birds have been roosting in my garden for the past year, I could not find their nest. Since mid-October 1999, a juvenile bird also accompanies the pair, testifying their breeding success this season. Every evening, about 45-60 minutes before sunset, the family arrives in the garden and makes its presence felt through their repetitive "tik-tik-tik-", and not the usual "towit-towit-towit-". At this point, the birds continue their search for insects amongst leaves and bark. Their feeding sorties are interrupted by short preening bouts, which involve face scratching, wing stretching and preening of

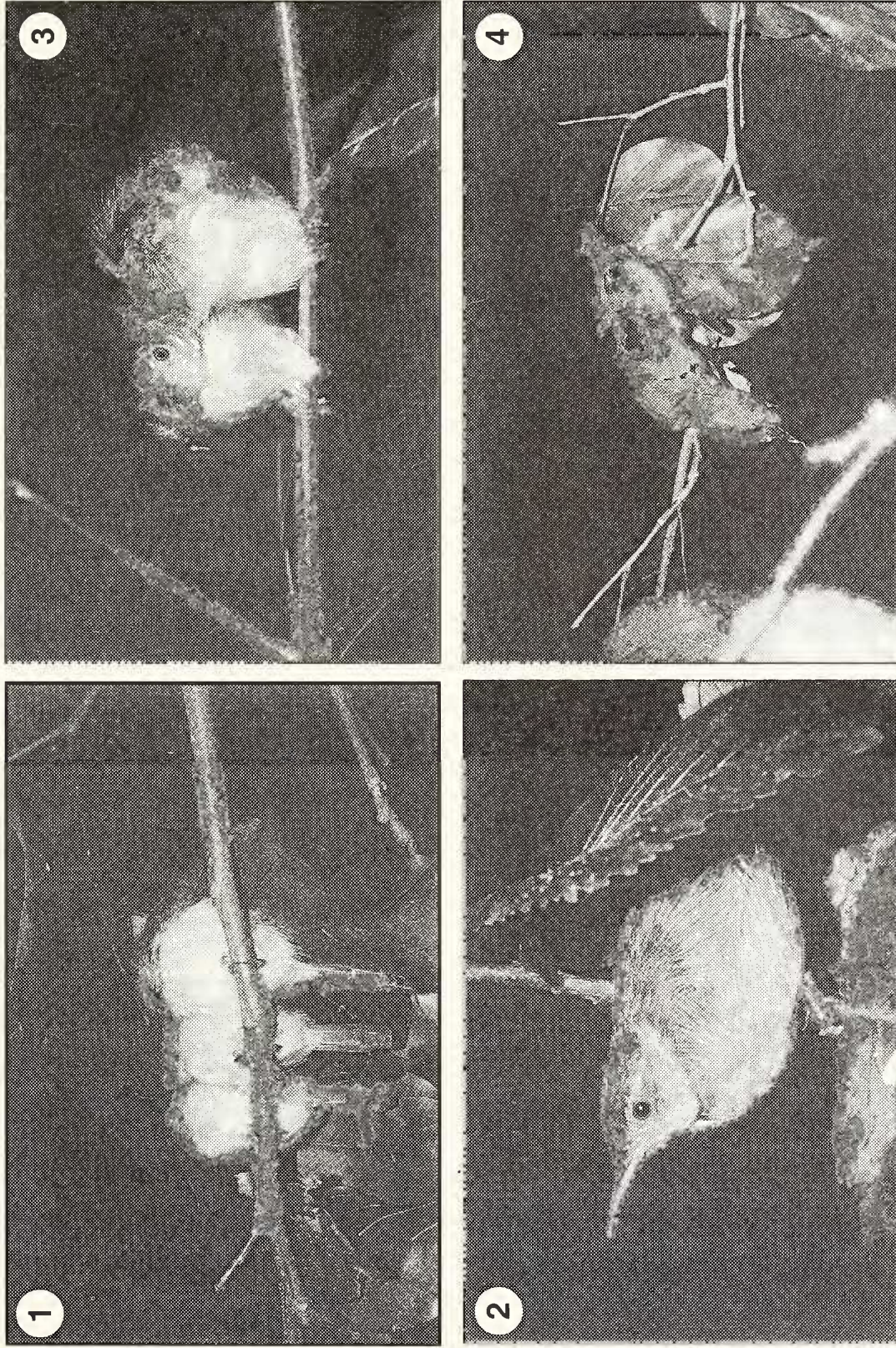


Fig. 1: A fledgling sandwiched between the parents. The male is easily identifiable by its long tall feathers. Also notice that the heads are tucked behind their shoulders

Fig. 2: An adult bird roosting independently during the non-breeding season, approximately 1.5 m from the ground

Fig. 3: Cuddling behaviour among a pair of common tailorbird during the breeding season, about 1.5 m from the ground (Plant: *Adhatoda vasica*)

Fig. 4: Roosting site on *Pongamia pinnata* (about 4 m from the ground) after the fledgling began accompanying its parents. The overhead leaves award protection from avian predators, while there is no leaf cover from below. The rear portion of the birds is also visible

various portions of the plumage. In between these seemingly casual activities, they make sallies to the roost for a thorough inspection, where they spend not more than a few seconds.

Finally, after spending about 15-20 minutes in the vicinity of the roost, one of the adults, along with the juvenile, moves towards the roosting site. The birds may give a loud "tik-tik-tik-" in rapid succession just before settling in the roost. This is more pronounced on sensing a cat in the garden (there has always been at least one cat, often two, in our compound). Surprisingly, the presence of the felines has not deterred them from roosting here. The other adult bird, a male (as could be identified from the longish tail feathers) has always been observed to join the other two later (after another 10-15 minutes). During the time he spends alone, he is largely silent, usually engrossed in vigorous preening.

Once in the roost, the three birds become silent and cuddle together i.e. one sandwiched between the other two (Plate 1, Fig. 1). The three birds mostly sit facing the same direction. This, however, is by no means a rule. Interestingly, the juvenile is always in the centre. Here it must be added that before the breeding season, the adults never cuddled together (Plate 1, Fig. 2). They would roost on the same shrub, but on separate twigs. Later, during late August, i.e. after the commencement of the breeding season, the couple was seen cuddling together during the night (Plate 1, Fig. 3). They continued to roost jointly in the beginning of October, while raising a litter in one of the adjoining buildings (nesting site not known). I would like to bring to the notice of the readers that in the past, I have seen similar behaviour among oriental white-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus* and ashy prinia *Prinia socialis*. In both instances, the number of birds involved were three, indicating the presence of a juvenile. Such cuddling behaviour, therefore, seems to be a part of the parental care amongst tiny solitary roosters.

Another interesting analogy can be made

between the loud calls of the tailorbirds and the gregarious birds like house sparrows *Passer domesticus* and house crows *Corvus splendens*, which are also very noisy just before occupying their roosts. If disturbed before sunset, they leave the roost giving loud "tik-tik-tik-" calls, but return at the first opportunity. In fact, one evening, though human movement frequently disturbed the birds, they refused to abandon the roost. Each time the birds returned in a few minutes, accompanied by loud alarm calls. The reluctance to evacuate the roost highlights the unwillingness to search for a new site in the fading light.

The roosting site is invariably a thin horizontal branch about 1-4 m from the ground. It always has a few overhanging leaves on the top, forming a roof (Plate 1, Fig. 4), although there may or may not be any foliage at the bottom. This clearly suggests that the birds make concerted efforts at selecting a site that is concealed from nocturnal avian predators, and are not too concerned about predators that are likely to approach from below. In addition to this, protection from heavy downpour during monsoon may also govern such a site selection. Once, for a couple of weeks, they even roosted within a metre from our ground-floor balcony and seemed indifferent to the continual disturbance caused by the lamps. They seem to be using human presence/movement to their advantage, as many predators avoid heavily inhabited areas.

While roosting, they crouch on both legs and tuck their heads over their shoulders (Plate 1, Fig. 1), beneath fluffed feathers. They continue to occupy a particular site for days (20-25) until disturbed or till the leafy roof withers away, a distinct possibility during winter. If bothered during the night, they refuse to abandon the roost even if an interloper actually touches them. This ploy of remaining motionless may be a defence strategy against arboreal reptilian predators that are more sensitive to movement than visual clues. However, they tend

to change the roost on the subsequent night. The newly selected roost is always on another plant, but within the garden. They keep changing the location during the following nights until satisfied with the fresh one.

Other noteworthy observations are:

- a) In spite of roosting in close proximity of human habitations, they never use man made structures for the purpose.
- b) The adults roosted much closer to the ground, approximately 2 m, whereas after being accompanied by the fledgling the roost was always beyond 3 m, mostly about 4 m from the ground.
- c) They tolerate house sparrows at quite a close distance.
- d) They refuse to abandon their roost even if they realize that the observer is watching them.
- e) Mosquitoes were noticed parasitizing on the sleeping birds.
- f) In the morning, the birds leave the roost just before it gets bright i.e. the same time when the house sparrows start getting restless and noisy.
- g) Firecrackers had little effect on the birds as they continued to occupy the site during Diwali festival.

From the above observations it is clear that a medium sized tree with low horizontal branches e.g. *Pongamia pinnata*, *Butea monosperma*, *Ficus hispida* or a shrub like *Adhatoda vasica* or *Ixora* sp. is all that is required to attract birds even in crowded cities like Mumbai. Just as it is vital to study the diurnal habits of various fauna, understanding their nocturnal habits, if not more, is equally essential for devising appropriate conservation strategies. The survival of every species is dependent on a proper blend of its adaptation to the geographical cycles of winter and summer, day and night. The common tailorbirds in my garden have accentuated just that.

With the help of the BNHS, I intend to ring these birds in order to monitor their roosting/ breeding behaviour in the coming year.

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20. SIGHT RECORDS OF CRIMSON SUNBIRD *AETHOPYGA SIPARAJA* IN ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

The crimson sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja* has been recorded in the Himalayas west to Kangra in Himachal Pradesh (Ripley 1982). During the winters of 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, I observed this species at Islamabad, Pakistan, far to the west of its hitherto known range and the first records for this country, apparently.

The first observation was one juvenile/ eclipse male *Aethopyga siparaja*, seen for about 15 min, at about 15 m range, through 10 x 50 binoculars, at 1000 hrs on December 11, 1999

in an Islamabad garden (Sector G 6/4), feeding from eucalyptus flowers. The bird appeared uniform dark olive-green above, uniform yellowish-olive green below (perhaps slightly more yellow towards the belly), with a dull reddish-pink chin and throat (not extending to breast). No evident eyebrow, and dark eye prominent on an otherwise plain face. No ashy or grey tinge on either upperparts or underparts. No yellow was noticed on the rump, nor any white tips to tail feathers. which was short and